

She's Forever Present, Marina Abramović: An Artist, An Innovator, And The Grandmother of  
Performance Art

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## She's Forever Present, Marina Abramović: An Artist, An Innovator, And The Grandmother of Performance Art

### Introduction

As a researcher, scholar, and upcoming graduate I have recently become fascinated by the world of performance art. Only a few months prior to starting this project I was introduced to performance art in a Group Performance Studies course at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. We began the course talking through the historical roots of performance studies and were introduced to various terminology and approaches necessary in understanding the world of performance. However, there was a specific moment during this course I will never forget, the moment we were introduced to Marina Abramović. Everything we were taught finally made sense to me; it was as though Abramović served as the final puzzle piece toward understanding the world of performance art.

As a class we were shown two separate videos; the first was of a piece entitled *Rythym 10* and the second was a video of Lady Gaga reflecting on Abramović's piece *Rhythm 0*. Abramović's work, and the power she exerts as an influential figure in the world of performance art, has inspired me to further explore this unconventional art form. In light of Abramović's *Rhythm 0* piece, I will first elaborate on how the world of art has shifted from something that was once recognized as being beautiful and pleasurable on a more disconnected level, to an art that establishes a space for an audience to become interactive or proactive participants within the piece. Following my explanation of how art has shifted, this project will first explore Abramović on a personal level, then establish the importance of the audience/performer interaction, followed by presenting the ability of performance art to address social issues such as feminism, and finally

provide a new understanding of performance art as a type of live advertisement meant to promote future change.

### **Art and The Body**

Through my research I have come to recognize that art should not be bound to expectations, but rather represent something that challenges society and individuals' ways of thinking about the world. We can further understand art by metaphorically connecting it to a window and its frame. A window's frame cannot be changed once it is put together, but the curtains and décor that are placed around the frame can be changed. Furthermore, life beyond the window is also forever changing. Art (in its most recognized form), therefore, can be seen at the surface level as the window frame. Once an artist has finished a painting and it is hung in a gallery, or put on display, there is no going back and changing it. The individuals that come to view the work may change and the gallery around the work may change but the painting is still the same.

In contrast, performance art may differ from more traditional art in that it is not “‘decided’ art; historically buttressed by the language of form *over* content [... art is not concerned with] the contents within the frames but the decided nature of the frames themselves that ‘artify’” (Schneider 14). There is no decided frame, but performance art becomes an open forum of expression in which the frame may be altered in any way the performer desires. Performance art has pushed the limits to where art is no longer a piece of work which can be seen as separate from the artist completely, but art is the artist, it is the body, it is the progressive movement, and it is the outlet for change.

Art, whether consciously or subconsciously, influences individuals to react, behave, or feel a particular way. Consequently, when the lines of art, and performing as an art, become

blurred, many of the challenges or expectations become more complex for the art's audience. On a simplistic level, performance as an art is when an artist places their physical body, or another's body, as a part of the art. The body itself may stay stationary in the art piece but a physical body is still full of life. It is the body that represents "a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body" (Spry 1); this is what makes performance art so entertaining and powerful. Ultimately, the body becomes more than just a body.

Furthermore, performance art pushes the boundaries on society and evokes a sense of change and empowerment through self-expression. Women have especially found performance art to be a powerful tool enabling them to address social issues that have historically been holding them down for years. Artists, such as Marina Abramović, have been using performance art as an outlet to challenge societal norms, and to pose questions about the world in which we live. Through the emergence of performance art and the rise of the feminist movement, Abramović's 1974 *Rhythm 0* portrayed the message of accepting, while simultaneously denying patriarchy in a dramatic and extroverted exhibit.

### **Abramović: From The Beginning to *Rhythm 0***

Born on November 30, 1946 Abramović is a daughter, a sister, an innovator, and the grandmother of performance art. Abramović had a very difficult childhood, as her parents were in an abusive and unstable marriage. In an interview with the New York Times series "TimesTalks," Abramović recalls a time when her father was washing dishes and accidentally ended up breaking a glass. When Abramović's mother walked in she began yelling at him and screaming how the broken glass represented their broken relationship; Abramović recalled the

arguing going on for fourteen minutes. Her father then took eleven more glasses and broke all of them. As a child she was constantly subjected to situations like this one where her parents would go back and forth at each other with what seemed to be no substantial reasoning. Abramović lacked any kind of affection from her parents when growing up. Although, she later found her art to be a positive outlet of expression for her past family tribulations.

When Abramović was older, she was accepted to the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade. This was where she would begin her career as an artist; but her time in art school was not an easy road. She found herself “anxiously hyperactive, obsessively productive, and always striving for public recognition” (Westcott 33). Abramović tried to use art to express herself and the things she was interested in, but she was bound by what the academy wanted to see in art. It wasn’t long before she became “increasingly frustrated with painting: she couldn’t make it convey the clarity and emotion of her ideas” (Westcott 45). From her frustration grew many aggressive performance art ideas, and the realization that that body could be used as a powerful tool in transcending the world of art. For Abramović performance art became “that discourse, [and] that practice, through which perception and categorization together can open the body and change it” (Demaria 300). In other words performance art became a stepping-stone for Abramović to explore her body in front of an audience—allowing her to connect with the reactions from her audience. Her audience’s reactions, along with her own desire, pushed her to challenge the limits of her body. Abramović quickly recognized that what she was missing from her paintings was any true physical and mental experience. Using her body as an aid in her performance would allow her to fully express herself.

Performance art thus provided Abramović with the new and innovative artistic platform she had been searching for. She was not only able to mentally think through the type of art she

wanted to present to the world, but performance art enabled her to place herself—her own body—in the forefront of her art. Ultimately, the use of her body within her art gave rise to an entirely new and powerful physical and mental connection. Therefore, Abramović found herself connecting with her audience on a deeper level; she was able to experience and embody the reactions to her work. Furthermore, she connected to herself on a deeper level through pushing and challenging the physical and mental limits of her body.

Abramović's body became the subject and medium of her artist expression. She became wrapped up in “exploring the physical and mental limits of her being; she has withstood pain, exhaustion and danger in the quest for emotional and spiritual transformation” (Marina Abramović 1). Abramović showed other artists how powerful performance art could be; it was capable of breaking the boundaries of conventional art while also breaking personal mental and physical limits.

The groundwork and emotional framework of Abramović's performances were derived from many experiences during her unhappy childhood. Abramović is a firm believer that the unhappy moments in your life and feelings of pain become the essential parts of your work to help change the world (Abramović 2013). The notion of pain becomes an important concept to recognize and connect with when exploring and becoming familiar with Abramović's work. Indeed, it was Abramović's 1974 performance art piece *Rhythm 0* that truly embraced her connection to her audience through an actual physical and mental interaction of pain and pleasure.

Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, although controversial to some audiences, directly challenges human nature. As a performance artist Abramović realized there was a cultural shift from audiences being passive viewers, to their new eagerness to be active participants. She often talks

about her audience in terms of being a viewer who becomes the experimenter, who then becomes an active participant. It's human nature for people to want to feel an emotion, they want to experiment, and they want to change something (Abramović 2013). Abramović created *Rhythm 0* in response to one key comment many critics' made: that artists who use their body in an aggressive way are sensationalists. Even Abramović's mother made comments to her "that performance artists were unhealthy masochists, obsessed with inflicting pain on themselves" (Westcott 73). She wanted to create a piece where she would put full trust in, and give power to, her audience. In order for Abramović's performance to successfully capture the reality of human nature—the wanting to inflict pain and pleasure on one another—she relied solely on the fact that her audience would be heavily active.

*Rhythm 0* was performed at the Gallery Studio Morra in Naples. This performance required Abramović to stand impassively for six hours, from 8pm to 2am, while her audience was given full authority to do whatever they wanted to her. She furthermore informed her audience that she was taking full responsibility for anything that may happen. Abramović's audience was given the freedom to use any of the 72 items placed on a table next to her. Included in the items were objects that would inflict pain, objects that would inflict pleasure, and even objects that would bring her to death. Some of these items included: a rose, a feather, a scalpel, a whip, a hammer, a Polaroid camera, a bullet, a pistol, a comb, and a handkerchief. A complete list of the items can be found in the appendix. What Abramović wanted to make clear was that she was "an object and anyone can do what they want with" her (Novakov 31).

At first Abramović's audience remained extremely passive, undoubtedly questioning whether she would actually follow through with her performance. It was documented that "about three hours went by before the audience took the inevitable step of removing Abramović's



clothes [... and from there she was soon] manipulated into a series of poses” (Westcott 76). Her audience soon realized that she would stay true to her word; they were being given the full power to do what they wanted to her without judgment. In an interview Abramović reflected back on her uneasiness:

I felt really violated: there was this person who cut my neck with a razor and drank my blood. There was another who gave me a rose and a third person who cut my clothes and who took the thorn of the rose and stuck it into my body. They undressed me, they didn't rape me because their wives were there [...] the women would tell the men what to do to me. And there was one who came with a handkerchief and took my tears running down my face. (“OpenIDEO” 1)

Through the torture of being cut, picked, and pried at, Abramović was strong enough to stay completely in the piece. She was able to do this through channeling her energy to different personal levels. Abramović explains that it is through her channeling that she is “transformed into a mirror for the public's projection, so that whatever is projected onto [her], desire, fear of death, whatever, [she] can react against by simply jumping into this higher self” (Novakov 31). It's clear that *Rhythm 0* was not only a performance in which tested how far humans would go to inflict pain or pleasure on another, but it also became an extremely personal and physical test for Abramović.

As each hour passed, Abramović's audience started to become more comfortable with her and with the idea of trying out any and all of the items on the table. In an interview Abramović recalled her experience:

They carried me around, put me on the table and stab the knife between my legs.  
And then one man took the pistol, put the bullet and put it my hand and held it to

my head to see if I would really pull the trigger by pressing my hand. And I didn't have any resistance. And then came another person who took the pistol and threw it out of the window. ("OpenIDEO" 1)

Abramović quickly realized that while there are people who were actually willing to end her life there were also people equally as willing to stop them. It is through experiences like this one where we recognize the true power of performance art. Performance art can be used to understand humans and furthermore come face to face with the reality behind what motivates us in the everyday. However daunting it may be to accept, or in Abramović's position physically experience, this performance brings to light everything that humans regret to accept. We are driven to inflict pain or pleasure or we are driven to stop it. Both are very real and very much a part of human nature.

Once the gallery informed Abramović that the six hours were over, she stood up and walked toward her audience. She was covered in blood, naked, and full of tears. It was at this point that she found her audience moving quickly away from her, not willing to confront their own actions. Abramović came to terms with how dangerous her piece actually was, "after the performance, [she had] one streak of white hair on [her] head. [She could not] get rid of the feeling of fear for a long time. Because of this performance, [she] know[s] where to draw the line so as not to put [herself] at such risk" (O'Hagan 1). Abramović's piece would have never gained as much attention and truly captured the intent behind individuals' behaviors had it not been for the audience's participation. Abramović's performance, *Rhythm 0*, should thus be valued for the way in which it drew attention to her audience, and the way that it acknowledges how important an audience is to the world of performance art.

### **The Audience/Performer Relationship**

Through my research I have found a new way of looking at the audience and the role they play within the realm of performance art. While there is a distinct relationship the performer creates with their audience, it is equally important to understand that “performance suggests the presence of an audience, an audience distinct from the performer” (Pelias and Shaffer 21). The audience has been drawn to the art for a particular reason, and once in the presences of the performance they function and are impacted by the art on an individual as well as group level. Herbert Blau, in his book *The Audience*, points out that since the beginning of performance art the goal of performance “was to force the spectator into the center of the creative act” (17). Performance art was focused around making the audience active participants by aiding them in creating pieces where the audience would have to evoke some meaning-making component. This meaning-making component can come from the audience’s individual and group interaction with the performance piece.

*Rhythm 0* affirms the notion that audiences are not only functioning as individuals but as a group as well. Had Abramović’s piece solely relied on individual thought to use the objects on her I think the piece would have had an entirely different outcome. To understand this specifically we can look to the individual who was willing to kill her and the men who wanted to rape her. Had it not been for other audience member’s reactions to these individuals actions—the man throwing the gun out the window and the women subconsciously stopping their husbands—Abramović would have experienced something completely different and she may not even be alive today. This reaction makes sense given the understanding that “although the audience members are likely to construe the event in some shared ways, each individual constructs a private vision, based upon personal schemes for making sense of the world” (Pelias and Shaffer

22). While one individual had the private vision and the intent of killing her, another had a private vision and intent of saving her. Furthermore, while the men probably had the private vision of raping Abramović, they stopped on the account that their wives' private vision of them not wanting to be disrespected. Thus, these actions show the audience members functioning more as individuals than as a group.

On the other hand, the outcome of the performance—the pain and serious mental distress inflicted on Abramović— was a direct result of the audience functioning as a group. Once the stage was set by the first few participants that used the objects on Abramović, the exhibit became more dangerous. People started to become frenzied with excitement that they were truly being given the power to do what they wanted with her. It's clear that individuals find it easier to respond to, or take part in, an experience where they know something clearly is not right when there is a group of people backing them up and engaging in similar actions. In this case, given the reality that everyone ran away from the exhibit once it was over, individuals knew their actions were not acceptable outside the world of Abramović's performance art piece. However, because the group was inflicting pain and pleasure on her together, it was easier for people to justify their engagement in similar activities.

Audience reactions are responses to how they make sense of theatrical pieces, and the conventions that are usually in place. For example, a “performer might invite the audience to break such theatrical conventions, but unless performers extend such an invitation, the [spectators fail] to follow the ‘rules’ for the theatrical behavior will be viewed as highly inappropriate” (Pelias and Shaffer 21). Abramović was fully aware of this performance norm. Therefore, she made a point, in *Rhythm 0*, to verbally express her intentions, as well as concretely displaying a sign, which encouraged her audience to engage in the piece by using the

objects on her. She wanted to give her audience full control in guiding the success of the performance piece. Her sign presented this more explicitly, stating: “there are 72 objects on the table that can use on me as desired I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility” (Balfour 1). This “invitation” paved the path for acceptable behavior for her audience—the use of any object with their personal discretion as to how far they were willing to go to inflict pain or pleasure on her. Without this invitation, her audience would have most likely followed typical performance art conventions of how an audience member is supposed to behave. Typical, simply meaning using both individual as well as group engagement to create meaning from the piece, without any true physical involvement.

Another component of Abramović’s performance art pieces also are grounded in the emotion and passion she has for engaging her audience in personal self-reflection. There is a line between the private and public self in performance art that becomes blurred for an artist. What has yet to be considered is what happens to the space you keep between yourself as an artist (given that you become the art) and your audience. When Abramović was asked how she is able to define the space between herself and the public her answer replicated that of a well-spoken, truly influential and established artist. She stated that she defines the space and that it is actually something that she feels, furthermore she is “very conscious of how much freedom [she] can give to that public energy, and yet if [she doesn’t] make this space available, the public has no way to engage in the work” (Novato 31). Without audience engagement the work becomes meaningful, if at all, only for the performer. What is meant by this is that performance art purposefully creates space for the audience to become active participants, so when the space is not created for them to participate in the piece they are left without any true connection to the art. Therefore, the audience is not able to find meaning from the art.

Performance art becomes only as powerful as an artist is willing to allow their audience to connect with them and the message they are trying to convey. It's the responsibility and challenge given to the artist to recognize that "whatever happens to [them], [they] are in turn transmitting [...they] become a space, a space in which the public can project onto [their] body" (Novakov 31). This type of self-expression requires an intense amount of concentration and personal sacrifice for the sake of art.

Abramović experienced a connection with her audience on an entirely different level during one of her first performance art pieces, *Rhythm 10* in 1973. During this piece Abramović laid down a piece of white paper, twenty knives, and two recorders. She positioned her body sitting on her knees with her hand in front of her on a white piece of paper. Then she would go through using all of the knives, stabbing between her fingers, while listening to her pre-recorded track. The track was the recorded sound of her stabbing the knife between her fingers until she missed and cut herself. She would cut herself with each of the knives at exactly the same time as she had during the recording. She wanted to link the stabbings together in the same sequence. The connection she created between herself and her audience was more physically demanding than she thought it was going to be. She was able to fully grasp how powerful her body could be: as the subject and as the object. Furthermore she realized the capability she was given to push the limits of herself in front of her audience. There was a unique type of energy she discovered that she was able to draw from her audience and in turn she was able to project the energy back onto her audience. Her first experience of this heightened emotional connection with her audience may have led her to create *Rhythm 0*. There was a thrilling component Abramović was able to receive by, in essence, placing her life in the hands of her audience.

In an interview, *Marina Abramović: What is Performance Art*, Abramović talks a lot about the performer and audience experience, as well as about how performance art becomes something completely different than theater. Abramović believes theater to be something that is more artificial; performance art, by contrast, “is not theater, theater you repeat, theater you play someone else, theater is a black box” (Abramović 2010). Performance art requires you to play yourself and to work through personal experiences and feelings that emerge during your performance. It requires there to be an active audience because “without the audience the work does not exist, it has no meaning” (Abramović 2010). What Abramović seeks is to use her work to move beyond the artificial and create performances that are drawn from her personal experiences.

From Abramović’s work it is clear that the audience’s role in performance art has become equally important as the role of the performer. Ronald Pelias and James VanOosting’s article, “A Paradigm for Performance Studies” states that performance art is different than traditional performance because it strips “the stage bare, plac[es] the audience in stage space[,] invit[es] their active participation [...] and intentionally fail[s] to mark a beginning and end” (223). The level of audience participation completely changes from traditional art to the world of performance art. Participation has progressed above the role of the receiver or respondent and toward the co-producer or producer of the art. At this point “the distinction between performer and audience becomes less distinct [...] to the point where] the question of who is the performer and who is the audience is moot [...] all participants become performers” (Pelias and VanOosting 227). Therefore, without the performance artist recognizing their audience as powerful tools, they are missing an important component that separates conventional art from performance art. The performer to audience engagement pushes boundaries, challenges norms,

and encourages new ways of viewing the world and how people function and behave in the everyday.

One final point I found interesting (in regards to the performer/audience engagement) was Abramović's belief that performance art is unlike theater because it cannot be repeated. In regards to *Rhythm 0*, had the piece been repeated with an entirely new audience there would be a different outcome altogether. Abramović would have already experienced her vulnerability and therefore would have preconceived notions and feelings about what was going to happen; whereas her audience would start out as a blank slate. Furthermore, I would agree with Abramović that performance art can never be repeated because ultimately it is impossible to truly tell when the act of performance actually ends. In contrast, traditional theater can be repeated, when the actors walk on stage they are playing a part and once they exit the stage they are leaving that part behind. Therefore, they are able to perform the same act many times because their feelings become disconnected from their character and their audience altogether. The act of performance in regards to traditional theater has a distinct starting and ending point, whereas performance art does not.

In a way I think that even though Abramović's confrontation of her audience may have marked the end of her submissiveness, the performance piece still continued. Her audience's reactions at the "end" were a part of her piece. I don't think there was ever a true ending point to *Rhythm 0*. Abramović has continued to be personally connected to that moment and what she experienced. As I'm sure her audience, even though they are no longer physically a part of the piece, have in some way been changed. This performer--to--audience engagement can become so moving that they literally become bonded through experience. The "experience" of performance art can be further understood "as the dimension of language in which we create and recreate



ourselves in relation to the ‘real’ world around and in which we use those imaginative or artistic events (originated by others or by ourselves) to become new beings” (Pelias and VanOosting 220). This quote more simply meaning that performance artists render the everyday in a way that provides themselves and their audience room to create and recreate themselves as human beings; it allows them to change how they function in the world. While understanding the audience’s role in performance art is extremely important it does not encompass the full power of this artistic form.

### **Feminism’s Place in Performance Art**

There is an important cultural underpinning within performance art pieces. This type of art has become an “open form of expression with more access than rules and regulations, [therefore it] attracts groups that are oppressed or marginalized in mainstream culture” (Pelias and Shaffer 169). Performance art is considered avant-garde; avant-garde simply meaning that it is a new and innovative art form that pushes boundaries and challenges the status quo and societal norms. Although not all performance art holds political or social power; “art becomes political only through its integration with the social, and thus a social and political avant-garde is a bridge between art and life [...] Therefore, the task of the avant-garde, [performance artist], is to invite individuals to consider their own role in the production of culture and to suggest how the world could be remade” (Wheeler 493). For this reason it makes sense that marginalized and oppressed groups would find performance art to be especially powerful. They are able to present the world—to the world— how they believe it should be functioning. For example, using their art to replicate a world without racism, sexism, or any form of exploitation.

Given the rise of performance art in the 1970’s; “feminist performance art [became] one of the strongest examples of culture as text [...] women found performance to be a powerful tool

of communicating cultural identity” (Pelias and Shaffer 170). Historically, feminism is seen as a progressive movement that continues to transform over time. Unfortunately, because of this continuous transformation individuals question whether or not we are left in a fragmented state. Some would argue that we are. Through my research I have sought to fully understand this cultural component of performance art. In doing so, I have conducted a feminist critique of Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* in order to discover how powerful art can be in addressing questions of social and political concerns.

Before I am able to walk through my feminist critique of Abramović’s work it is important to bring light to the rise of feminism. Specifically I want to introduce a more thorough understanding of the different waves of feminism and how each wave differs from one another. The first wave of feminism rose in 1848 and lasted until 1920; this wave was primarily concerned with the women’s suffrage movement. During this wave, historical figures such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton emerged. Individuals of this time concerned themselves with political rights, specifically voting. The second wave of feminism began in the 1960’s, and continues today, dealing with economic and social issues. It was during this time that performance art grew in popularity. Lastly, the third wave of feminism began in the 1980’s and continues to the present as a reaction to the previous waves. This wave is primarily concerned with race and sexual orientation issues and other unequal power distribution concerns. However unfortunate, we have not completely rid ourselves of race, economic and social issues concerned with women and which is therefore why some argue that we are left in a fragmented state.

An article titled “Feminism in Waves: A Brief Overview of the First, Second and Third Wave” explores the transformation of these feminist waves and recognizes that “feminism is a movement which has been incredibly important to the success and failures of this country and

has been a necessary journey for the women in our country to travel upon so that they can discover and create their own unique place in society” (Mountain Writer 1). Even though this article is focusing on the United States, many of the points made about women being oppressed in a patriarchal society can be applied to many other countries. The rise of performance art, it can be argued, provided feminists with a productive and constructive outlet for change.

Each wave of feminism brings light to a different historically important issue. It is through criticism that we can recognize what rhetorical strategies are in place to bring attention to issues of feminism. Primarily, it is the job of the scholar or critic who “places literature [or art] in a social context and employs a broad range of disciplines, such as history, psychology, sociology, and linguistics, to create a perspective that considers feminist issues” (“Critical Approaches...” 1). We can look to literature from Karlyn Campbell, for example, who argues that “feminist criticism is substantively unique by definition, because no matter how traditional its argumentation, how justificatory its form, how discursive its method, or how scholarly its style, it attacks the entire psychosocial reality” (563). The psychosocial reality is grounded in the notion that patriarchy still exists and is functioning in our society. What a feminist critic attempts to address is whether the work they are analyzing presents an acceptance of, a resistance of, or both of patriarchy.

Feminism, as Campbell also mentions, is the process of stylistic “consciousness raising.” She explains that in order to draw attention to an issue you need to make people aware of it. She explains that, “as a process, consciousness raising requires that the person be transcended by moving toward the structural, [and] that the individual be transcended by moving toward the political” (569). It is through artistic outlets such as performance art that women have been able to use their bodies to liberate themselves from the patriarchal societies by which they have been

bound. Their bodies become a physical connection in transcending above the structural and challenging the political.

Performance art has provided women with the capability of utilizing their bodies as a powerful tool of expression. The “explicit body in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality—all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege” (Schneider 2). A woman’s body can thus be seen in two different ways. First, it becomes marked as a fantasized object of desire for men, and secondly it can serve as a communicator and as a symbol for social and political change. Therefore, it makes sense why feminist performance art has become so prominent. Women artists are able to attract the attention of men, through the implementation of their body as a centerpiece of their work, while simultaneously posing a call to action on an issue of importance.

The work of feminist performance art is more than just something to be quickly looked at and walked away from; it requires a certain level of intellectual activity for the piece to be fully understood. It is through this type of artistic expression that “a special place is staked out, a sacred ground, creating a rule-bound world of its own” (Bell 126). The artist, then, becomes the creator of his or her own world. Audiences are left to explore beneath the surface level presentation of the performance. It is the “meaning communicated by the performance [that] involves individual and cultural values to alert [...] two important dimensions of meaning-making and sense-making in performance (Stern 22). In other words, every individual, based on his or her personal and cultural values, will respond differently to performance. It becomes the task of the individuals to derive their own meaning and sense making from the performance.

As mentioned previously, the artists' separation of their private and public selves becomes further complicated in relation to wanting to make a cultural impact. This is because performance artists' recognize the power of performance and realize both positive and negative outcomes may result from any art they present to the world that addresses cultural issues. Yet at the same time they want to connect with their work, because they want their audience to connect with them and the message they are trying to convey. This presents a constant battle, "the explicit body performer wrestles with the secret service the 'private' plays as the public display by complicating the category of 'private' at all [...] Many explicit body performance artists make the private so explicitly public" (Schneider 72). It is their job as the performer to have their public and private self remain, however in addressing cultural concerns, it becomes difficult to create a barrier at all. Performance artists want to connect with their audiences just as much as they want their audiences to connect with them. This is especially true when artists are attempting to address social and political issues such as feminism. It is through making the private more public that artists are able to capture a larger audiences' attention and bring light to social issues on a more magnified level.

Abramović emerged during the second wave of feminism as one of the most notably recognized and powerful performance artists. Much of her work is intended to pull back the curtain on her public self, exposing her private self. Abramović believes that "performing is about the creation of a construction, the removal of the ordinary self and the insertion of a metaphor" (Novakov 31). Therefore, her private and public self become one to create remarkably avant-garde metaphorical messages. Many of the intended messages found within Abramović's work deal with feminist issues. In opposition to what many would believe based on the type of performance pieces Abramović creates, she does not identify herself as a feminist. In a New

York Times interview Abramović makes this clear, stating: “I’m not a feminist, by the way. I am just an artist” (Abramović 2013).

Even though Abramović does not recognize herself as a feminist I would make the claim that her work does deal with feminist issues. *Rhythm 0* is noted as one her most feminist performance art pieces; this piece accepts while simultaneously resists patriarchy. First, I will address how *Rhythm 0* presents the acceptance of a patriarchal functioning world. While it is true that “women performance artists have spent the past several decades trying to disrupt such ways of seeing, looking, and viewing women’s bodies in both staged performance and in everyday life” (Carver 394), Abramović has found a way to use her own body to create such disruptions. *Rhythm 0* allowed Abramović to use her body to encompass an extremely sexual and stereotypical display of women. In her piece she stood naked with an easiness about her and remained submissive to anything anyone wanted to do to her or with her. Her vulnerability captured women being seen as having no control over their thinking and feeling as human beings. Ultimately, *Rhythm 0* may directly call attention to the stereotype of women being solely objects of desire that should remain and serve as submissive beings to men.

It is undeniable that Abramović recognizes that “feminist body work exposes the ways in which women’s bodies are marked according to structures of desire...women’s bodies [are] seen as vessels of desire [that] have been displayed nude in artwork and seen as objects of visual pleasure” (Carver 394). For this reason *Rhythm 0* may at first be recognized as Abramović’s attempt to accept patriarchy. She gave her audience (which consisted of male participants) the full power to do anything they want with her. Patriarchy calls to action the power of the male and the submission of the female. It is furthermore “the positioning of women’s bodies as the vehicles for their art [that] lends a great sense of self to the performance” (Carver 394). This

notion alone captures the potential motive behind Abramović using her own body in her art; she was lending a greater sense of self— one that is truly grounded in the acceptance of a world functioning through patriarchy.

We can also use Abramović's audience's reactions to her piece as a form of acceptance of patriarchy. Even when given the permission, man or woman, to use any of the objects on her it was the wives who stood back and gave direction to their husbands of what they wanted to have done to Abramović. In reality, "the effort to denaturalize gender must be coupled with the project of historicizing the shadows, explicating or making explicit the haunting effects of naturalization" (Schneider 23). Abramović wanted to create a space that denaturalized gender, a space where no matter what culture, gender, or race, you were given the same opportunities to do with her what you desired. I think there was a haunting moment in which the women felt powerful enough to give direction to their husbands, but not strong enough to break all patriarchal norms and enact pain or pleasure on Abramović themselves. In this regard, Abramović's work functions as an attempt to resist patriarchy, but ultimately landed back in line with a patriarchal world.

On the contrary, from the standpoint of a feminist critic, *Rhythm 0* may also be looked at as a performance piece which was meant to express a resistance against patriarchy. Abramović's use of her body as the focal point of her art may itself become a symbol of resistance. Historically, "women have been involved in performance art and have worked to 'liberate' the body marked female from the confines of patriarchal delimitation" (Schneider 11). Abramović found the experience of using her own body a form of liberation. Abramović's submission to six hours of physical and mental distress reaches a climaxing moment at the end. The act of Abramović walking toward her audience covered in blood, after being violated, was an act of

liberation. She wanted to confront every action taken against her. In a way, she was making the point that a man's empowerment over a woman was no longer acceptable. Everyone is equal and no woman should be treated like an individual without control over what they are subjected to.

Whether Abramović wants to categorize herself as a feminist performance artist or not, it is apparent that through her attention to audience and the social and political concerns addressed in her work, she is a powerful and moving artist. Through my feminist critique and my nuanced understanding of an audience's relationship to the performer I have been come to recognize how the two are interconnected. Schneider, helps further make this case:

Performance implies always an audience/performer or ritual participant relationship—a reciprocity, a practice in the constructions of cultural reality relative to its effects. As such the study of performance and the trope of performativity have become integral to a cultural critical analysis which wants to explore the dynamic two-way street, the 'space between' self and others, subjects and objects, masters and slaves, or any system of social significance. (22)

Without the audience you have no performer/audience participant relationship, without any relationship there can be no meaning-making, without meaning-making there will be no change, and without change there is no way of challenging the social system of the world. Performance art becomes powerful in that it accounts for every aspect: the audience, the performer, the private self, the public self, the meaning making, the change, and the power to challenge societal norms. After exploring the audience's relationship to the performer in light of Abramović's work and throughout performance art in general, and after conducting a feminist critique of *Rhythm 0*, I started to make sense of performance art in an entirely new way.

### **A New Way of Understanding Performance Art**



Every day, we walk around and are faced with images, either from movies, from television, from billboards, etc. We process the images and their messages and determine if they are worthy of remembrance based on whether they appear relevant to us in any way.

Performance art may be seen as a type of live advertisement. This type of advertising, “reveals the richness of daily life in society for it reflects both reality and fantasy at the same time as it seeks to affect the future” (Stern 1). In *Rhythm 0*, Abramović reveals the richness of everyday life; the capabilities all humans have to ensue pleasure or pain upon themselves; and yet she also reveals a fantasy (however unethical this fantasy may be): the idea that an individual can do anything to another individual without consequence. As mentioned, an advertisement also attempts to affect the future. Abramović’s 1974 exhibit calls into question human nature while simultaneously exploiting the female body as nothing other than a sex object—one which can be taken advantage of (in whatever way seems necessary) without consequence. Through Abramović’s overtly dramatic and controversial presentation she has “found performance to be a powerful tool of communicating cultural identity... [and a potential way] to educate and transform, to unify and heal” (Pelias and Shaffer 170) society. Thus, her performance art piece was also created to somehow affect the future.

### **Making Sense of Performance Art**

Performance art, I have come to understand, is more than just a break away from contemporary art; it is an audience--engaging advertisement that evokes change and movement toward a brighter society. Through my research on Abramović’s 1974 *Rhythm 0* I have been able to draw deeper meaning and greater understanding from her piece, and from her as an individual. She sees herself not as a feminist but as an artist, her art grounded in her past childhood experiences, experiences that evoke feelings of pain and fear. She found performance art to be a

more expressive form of art, one she could use to engage in personal mental and physical experiences. She was pushed to challenge her limits on an artistic and personal level. She wanted to play with the idea of separating the private and public self while simultaneously addressing issues of social and political concern.

Every performance art piece Abramović creates has meaning; it is the job of both Abramović (as the creator of the space) and the audience to find meaning within the piece. Abramović's *Rhythm 0* captures every aspect of her personal engagement in the world of performance art. She allows her audience the power to make meaning of her piece through their own enactment with her, while also exploring the acceptance and resistance of patriarchy; both are brought together in an a type of live advertisement put on display and meant to provoke future change. Whether this change is directed towards concerns of patriarchy, or in terms of how the limits of performance art can be pushed, what matters is Abramović's power as a performance artist. She captivates, enlightens, and encourages outward expression for the betterment of performance art, and furthermore for understanding the world and individual motivation in the everyday.

Through my research—specifically my introduction to performance studies and Marina Abramović—I have come to understand communication and art in an entirely new light. Art is something that has drastically changed over time: from a beautifully crafted stationary display to a piece of work that captures every aspect of human life. Artists are exploring a new outlet to communicate and connect with their audience; therefore, performance art has become its own form of communication. This form of communication establishes a dynamic relationship that pushes boundaries and addresses issues of political and social concern. Overall, performance art

has opened a new form of artistic expression that bonds the words, the beauty, and the body of the performer—enabling them to communicate anything to anyone they desire.

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## Appendix

### List of Items: *Rhythm 0*

Gun  
 Bullet  
 blue paint  
 comb  
 bell  
 whip  
 lipstick  
 pocket knife  
 fork ☐  
 perfume  
 spoon  
 cotton ☐  
 flowers  
 matches ☐  
 rose ☐  
 candle  
 water  
 scarf  
 mirror  
 drinking glass  
 polaroid camera  
 feather  
 chains  
 nails  
 needle ☐  
 safety pin ☐  
 hairpin ☐  
 brush  
 bandage ☐  
 red paint  
 white paint  
 scissors  
 pen ☐  
 book  
 hat ☐ handkerchief ☐  
 sheet of white paper ☐  
 kitchen knife ☐  
 hammer  
 saw ☐  
 piece of wood ☐ =  
 ax ☐  
 stick

☐ bone of lamb ☐  
 newspaper  
 bread ☐  
 wine  
 honey  
 salt  
 sugar  
 soap  
 cake  
 metal pipe ☐  
 scalpel  
 metal spear ☐  
 box of razor blades ☐  
 dish  
 flute ☐  
 band aid  
 alcohol  
 medal  
 coat  
 shoes ☐  
 chair  
 leather strings  
 yarn ☐  
 wire ☐  
 sulphur  
 grapes ☐  
 olive oil  
 rosemary  
 branch ☐ apple